**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 22 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE NEARNESS OF GOD DISCOVERED by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is m this place; and I knew it not.*

*Genesis 28:16*

LAST SUNDAY EVENING I PREACHED FROM THIS TEXT, LEAVING my message unfinished. I return to it tonight that I may say some things which were then omitted.

In order to have sequence of thought I must briefly summarize what already has been said. The words of the text reveal the waking consciousness of Jacob after the dream in which he was brought to first-hand, practical consciousness of the omnipresence of God in discovering in that barren place and in unexpected circumstances that God was actually with him. Said he in the waking hours of the morning, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." In that confession two matters arrest our attention: first, the man's unconsciousness of the nearness of God; second, the discovery of the fact of God's nearness, its method and its meaning.

The first of these occupied our attention last Sunday evening: man's unconsciousness of the nearness of God. In the case of Jacob it was confessed in the hours of the morning as he looked back, "I knew it not." In all likelihood, and almost certainly, Jacob believed intellectually in the presence of God everywhere; and yet when he arrived that night after the long journey and chose for himself the only pillow available, a hard stone, and laid his head thereupon to rest, he was not conscious of the nearness of God, had not thought of God, was not engaged on a quest for God, was not seeking Him. In the morning, looking back, he said, in effect, I arrived here last night, tired and weary, chose my stone, pillowed my head thereon, and went to sleep with God; but I did not know it. This unconsciousness of God is patent in the ordinary life of men, and in the life of men who intellectually believe in the nearness of God, men whose conception of God is the Biblical conception, the Christian conception, that wherever man is found, there also is God, and that man cannot escape from Him. If a man shall ascend into heaven, God is there; or if he may descend into hell, God is there; or if he take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth, even there God's hand holds him, supports him; if man shall say, The darkness shall hide me, even the night is light round about him, for he has to do with a God Who seeth in the darkness as well as in the light. Nevertheless, in spite of intellectual conviction, men live unconscious of the God in Whose presence they ever are.

The reasons of this unconsciousness of God are intellectual limitation, spiritual dullness, and moral failure. Intellectual limitation, for no man by searching can find out God unto perfection; He must be apprehended of the spiritual sense, and where that spiritual sense is dead, atrophied, in-active, man is unconscious of God. He may affirm the fact of God's existence, believe in His nearness, and yet never touch Him or be conscious of His touch on his own life. Man is unconscious of God because of spiritual deadness, and all spiritual deadness in human life is the result of moral failure. "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God," said God to His people in the olden days. Because of moral failure there is spiritual deadness, and because of spiritual deadness men live and move and have their being in God, and never touch Him consciously or see Him or know Him. "Surely God is in this place; and I knew it not."

The second fact suggested by this text is the method and the meaning of discovery of the fact of the nearness of God to the soul of a man. These things are illustrated in the story in the midst of which the text is found, and for that purpose we shall again this evening make certain references thereto.

As we approach this part of our theme we have to remember not only the fact of man's prevalent unconsciousness of God, but the issues of that unconsciousness. Unconsciousness of God shows forth in the dwarfing of the life and in the corruption of the life.

Unconsciousness of God means, first, the dwarfing of the life. A man unconscious of God sees only what is near. Peter, writing to Christian souls who had deflected from the straight course, said that if a man lack the graces of the Christian character, it is because he is blind, "seeing only what is near." That is the perpetual outcome of lack of consciousness of God: man sees only the things that are near; his life is horizoned by the material; his outlook is horizontal, not vertical, as Dr. Jowett has expressed it in his recent lectures on preaching; the outlook is upon the level on which the material stands, and he sees only the thing that is near. I know well that we speak of men in the commercial world and in the world of statecraft as far-seeing men. It all depends! How far can they see? If they see but the bounds of the present world, and understand no more than its methods and its markets, its policies and its arrangements, then they are near- sighted men. Yonder old woman, poor in this world's goods, entirely illiterate, who for forty, fifty, sixty years has lived in the light of the uplifted face of God, sees farther than all commercial princes and statesmen whose outlook is bounded by time and sense and things material. The man who has lost his consciousness of God sees nothing beyond the near, the things of to-day. If a man sees only the near he can become only the little. He has lost that which appeals to life so as to lift it: the sense of the things that lie beyond the sense of the ages, of the eternities, and of the spiritual. If a man lives hemmed in by the things of today and the things of the material world, he himself becomes of today and of the material world; his long gazing thereupon, bends and stoops him downward until he is dwarfed because he is unconscious of God.

Unconsciousness of God, therefore, issues in corrupting life. Life without God is life lacking its true quality, the atmosphere for which it was created, to which in the mystic fact of its being it does finally and actually belong. It is indeed true that in trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home. It is not only true that in Him "we live and move and have our being," as Paul declared on Mars Hill; it is also true as Paul also proclaimed, quoting from the Greek poets and declaring the truth of their affirmation, "We also are His offspring." To live apart from the fountain of life is to know the corrupting of life. To attempt to satisfy life on the level of the material is to debase, to degrade life. If men have no consciousness of God they are dwarfed, and presently corrupted; for there must forever remain within them the clamant cry for that for which they are made, and of which in the mystery of creation they form a part. If there be no answer to that cry, then the life is dwarfed and withered, and becomes corrupt because it turns to other sources, which do but destroy the life.

Twenty years later Jacob turned his face back again to his own land, and on his way home he had another spiritual experience. God met him in some form and semblance by the running brook Jabbok, and, wrestling with him through the night, mastered him and so changed him from Jacob, heel-catcher, to Israel, ruled by God. When the light of morning broke, Jacob said, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is healed." Men read that verse and imagine that Jacob meant, I have seen God face to face, and I am not destroyed. He meant something far finer. I have seen God, and my life is healed. Wherever the vision of God is lost the people perish. Wherever a man lacks the consciousness of God his life is dwarfed and corrupted; and as the vision heals, the absence of it destroys life.

The supreme note of the text, however, is that to this man, unconscious of the nearness of God, there came the discovery of the fact of God's nearness. Having the story in mind, let me, first of all, observe that the discovery of God to the soul of a man is always the act of God. Not only is it true that no man by searching can find out God to perfection; it is also true that man as you find him today is not consciously seeking God. Unconsciously, yes; in every enterprise of his life, in every enthusiasm that he allows to master him, in all the things that drive him, he is, without his knowing it, following after God if haply he may find Him. But not consciously, not willingly, does man set his face toward the face of God in the hope that. it may shine upon him through the gloom. Wherever there comes to a man the actual revelation of the fact of the nearness of God, it is by the act of God. By that I do not mean to say that men may not come to intellectual apprehension of the fact of the Divine existence as the result of their own investigation. I believe men may come to that apprehension in that way. I am speaking of something more personal and immediate, more vital in the matter of life. I am speaking of the consciousness in the soul of a man of the positive fact of God; and I affirm that wherever the discovery of God is made to the soul of man it is by the act of God. God uses many ways of discovering Himself to the souls of men. I like this particular story because here it was through a dream. We emphasize the value of this story when we remember it was but a dream; there was no actual ladder, no actual angels visible to sight, no actual form of Deity standing by the side of the man: it was a dream, to be accounted for, in all probability, quite naturally. Nevertheless, through that dream of the night God made Jacob certain of Himself, so reaching Jacob's inner consciousness, so appearing to his spirit life, that when morning came - and morning is the time of disillusionment, morning is the hour in which you laugh at your dream and see the unreality of it; but in this case the man came to the morning and when the mists melted from the rough and rugged hillside and light was everywhere, and no actual thing in nature had the strange, weird appearance of something supernatural - when the morning came he said, "God is in this place; and I knew it not." So by way of a dream, explain it as you will, God rode into the consciousness of this man, and He made the dream of the night the vehicle of His approach. He came to the soul of a man by way of a dream. Let me assure you that the day for even that method of God has not passed away. Even in these days of ours, if we did but understand it, God will ever and anon appear to men in dreams, natural dreams, and through them speak to the souls of men. If you are not of that particular temperament, then God has other ways of speaking to you. The thought of God comes to you in an unexpected place and moment: some arresting thought in the midst of the busy rush of life in the city, some startling thought that possesses you while the train is bearing you sixty miles an hour to your destination, some thought born within your mind as the result of some remark made by a friend on a totally different subject. In these ways God approaches the soul. By a word spoken, by some deed, in an hour of peril, in an hour of catastrophe, in an hour of high ambition and noble aspiration, in a moment of supreme joy, God makes Himself known. These are but faulty, halting illustrations. What I would emphasize is that God discovers Himself to men, directly, immediately, setting aside the priest and the prophet and the preacher, and Himself coming to the soul, God does this in the case of every human being. The trouble is, we do not always recognize that it is God. We treat the illumination as though it had been some will o' the wisp, some wild fantasy; yet in the moment, howsoever it came, from whencesoever it came, God was a reality; and God was a reality because He Himself was breaking through upon the consciousness of man.

We of the Christian faith, of the evangelical faith, and of the evangelistic method, are greatly in danger of imagining that God comes to men only through our preaching, and because we have such vain imaginings we lose many an opportunity of leading men to walk in the gleam of light that has come to them until they find the perfect day. God makes Himself known sooner or later, most often in childhood's days, and with greatest clearness; as the years pass, the sense of God recedes, until we still intellectually affirm our belief, but emotionally and volitionally deny it. Even then God ever and anon breaks through upon us. In such hours of breaking through, an opportunity is created for the soul of man. In that hour, come when it may or how it will, whether in the sanctuary or in the market place, whether in the loneliness of our own inner chamber, or amid the multitudes of men, in that hour, in that moment, God by that breaking through creates for a man an opportunity; and in that moment the man will seize his opportunity and follow the gleam, or else refuse to walk in the light until presently - not immediately it may be, but after a lapse of time - he will laugh at the idea that God ever did speak to him. It was not very long ago that a man in public life in this country said to a great company of men in a Northern town, in what he thought was a humorous vein, You know, many years ago, I was almost converted myself! Oh, God, that he might have known the tragedy of his own confession! Many years ago God broke through the mists and shone on his soul, and he very nearly answered, but not quite; until, after the lapse of years, he looked back and laughed at the folly of the idea, the infatuation of the notion that God had touched Him. Are not some of you very nearly in that condition? God broke through when He took your child away. God impressed Himself upon you in the hour of your new joy; almost involuntarily you found yourself desiring to be a priest, that you might offer the sacrifice of praise. God broke through in the midst of tragedy, or in the rapture of the comedy. What did you do? If you followed the gleam and worshiped, then there were other revelations for the path of the just man: the true man "shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

Let me speak of such as obey after discovering this fact of the nearness of God as a great reality. What does this discovery mean to the soul of the obedient? It is, first of all, a new interpretation of life. All life is different when a man is conscious of God. I do not think we can do better than go back to the old story and take the whole of that dream, for in that dream of the night great things were suggested to the soul of the sleeping man, the power of which abode with him as the morning broke and day succeeded to day.

The ladder which he saw was a ladder whose foot was set solidly on the earth and whose top reached the heavens. These are all figures of speech, but the facts they suggest are perfectly patent. In that night Jacob saw that wonderful suggestion of interrelationship between heaven and earth, of mediation between heaven and earth. He saw angels ascending and descending, and there came to him the conception of this life, this present life, with its wounds and weariness, as ministered to by angels. The supreme fact in the new interpretation was the nearness of God and the interest of God in him, the perfect knowledge of God concerning his immediate position, and the awareness that God committed Himself to his need.

When a man becomes conscious of God he becomes conscious of the relationship between heaven and earth, conscious of the spiritual ministries all about him of which he had never dreamed, conscious of the interest of God. Two men are in a beleaguered city; without are their foes, waiting for them. One of them cries to another, Master, what shall we do? The other said, O Lord, open his eyes, and

Lo, to faith's enlightened sight,

All the mountain flamed with light.

He saw on the mountain heights, gathered about the place of peril, the angels of God. Someone is saying, Of course we do not believe in that! Of course not, because you do not believe in God, and you do not know God; and therefore you limit your own life to this little world, and trust to your own wit and cleverness and your own manipulation of dust; but the man who has seen God knows not only that God created us, but that other worlds and other beings are round about us, and that in the mystery of His unfathomable and unquenchable love He sends angels and spiritual forces of which we had never dreamed to minister to us and to help us. In the light of the Christ revelation the writer in the New Testament catches up the great thought and expresses it in infinite music as he says of the angels, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service to the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?"

To be conscious of God is immediately to have a new interpretation of life, to discover that the earth itself is more than dust, that all flowers are more than the operation of blind force; to believe with Jesus that God clothes the grass, and robes the lily as Solomon was never arrayed, that He is with the birds, and remains their comrade in their dying. All creation utters forth this great evangel when a man is conscious of God. "This is the age-abiding life, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him Whom Thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." All life becomes new, so that the apostle will write, "If any man is in Christ," - which is the Christian way of saying, If any man has come to knowledge of God - "he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new." To be conscious of God, to know the fact of Him, to obey the revelation and to walk in the light of it, is to see every human face changed. We can no longer look with contempt on the bruised and battered face, for beneath the bruising and the battering we see the image of God. The measure in which we become conscious of God is the measure in which we cease to be narrowly patriotic, for we have come to the consciousness that "He made of one every nation of men." So flowers, birds, the sky, the earth, man, everything, becomes suffused with the glory of God when a man himself is living in the consciousness of God.

This necessarily means that a man comes to a new standard of action. His standard of action henceforth must be that of obedience to God, of co-operation with the angels. A man conscious of God has as the standard of his action the inspiration of his endeavor, a passion, all-consuming, to make this earth like unto His heaven; or, to express the thought in the older way, his passion will be that God's Kingdom shall come, that God's will shall be done, that God's name shall be hallowed on earth as it is in heaven.

This consciousness of God means not only a new interpretation of life and a new standard of action, it means also a new enablement, and that is the supreme matter and the supreme value. "God is in this place; and I knew it not." Why? Because of some moral failure and consequent spiritual dullness, whereby I am precluded from finding God. Then God, in infinite grace, and in ways that I know not of, breaks through upon my soul, and does that for me which I never could do for myself, and I, obeying, find moral enablement. There comes to me a sense of His great mercy and His great compassion. There comes to me a sense of the forgiveness of my sins, and out of that sense, if it indeed be a true sense, there springs a hot resentment against sin, a passionate endeavor to master it; and as I start on my crusade against sin in my own life, and in the world, I find I am being empowered by mystic forces of which I never dreamed, by spiritual might which is from God. He works in me to the willing and the doing of His good pleasure. When there is moral enablement there is spiritual quickening, and I come to know the Lord, "growing up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ," the horizon being put ever further back, all life widening, broadening, becomes more and more glorious. The intellectual limitation is negatived by the spiritual apprehension, and there comes that abiding certainty of God which no argument can destroy.

Finally, let us remember that of this great fact of the nearness of God the incarnation was the final unveiling. Surely that is what our Lord meant when speaking to Nathanael, the Israelite in whom there was no guile, he said, "Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." In other words, all that was suggested to Jacob in the dream of the night is vindicated, and verified in the Lord Christ Himself. By incarnation God revealed His nearness to men. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God … and the Word became flesh, and. dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from a Father), full of grace and truth." So opens this gospel of John in which alone is recorded the story of Christ's employment of the vision of Jacob for the suggestion of this truth. If in that incarnation the fact of God's nearness is interpreted, in what sense is God seen to be near to men? In the life of Jesus it is revealed that He is near to human circumstance and human experience of all kinds. Immediately following on the employment of the ancient story in the conversation with Nathanael three days afterward, He went to the house of joy to attend the wedding. God is near man in the hour of his joy, interested in his joy - I will say it reverently but I will say it - laughing with human joy, the merriment of the human heart causing gladness in the heart of God! Take the keynote of the Manifesto of Jesus, "Blessed," and it misses some of the music, or "happy," as some translate it, and even then you have not caught all the significance of the word the Lord did use. Not that the word "blessed" is wrong, not that the word "happy" is wrong, but that we are using them in peculiar ways; happy has become almost a flippant word, and blessed has become almost a sanctimonious word, which is worse. I venture to affirm that the word Christ used meant, well-to-do, prosperous. "Well-to-do are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." "Prosperous are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." The word insufficiently translated by our word "blessed" or "happy," and ill-translated by the phrase I suggest, is a revelation of God's purpose for man, it is that of joy, gladness. The Bible tells us that He will wipe all tears away, and that sorrow and sighing shall flee away. It never tells us that He will stop humanity's laughter, or end its merriment. There is no parable in all the New Testament finer in its revelation of the Father than the parable of the prodigal. The language of the father when the son comes home is this, "Let us eat, and make merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Jesus first went to the house of joy, near to human joy; but the last of the seven signs which John records gives us Jesus in the house of death, in the house of sorrow, God drawing near to the broken heart of humanity, and telling it the secret of the resurrection life, and illustrating the joy of the knitting up of severed friendships and reunions that are yet to be, as He gives Lazarus back to his broken-hearted sisters. Between that first sign, and that final sign, all the gamut of human emotion and experience is illustrated. The nobleman's son is sick, and God in Christ will heal him. In Bethesda's porches lies a man, eight and thirty years in the grip of an infirmity, and God in Christ will break sabbath to give that man sabbath. Five thousand folk are hungry for bread, and God in Christ knows that hunger, and supplies bread. A few souls are full of terror as the storm sweeps the sea, and God in Christ will hush the storm and give them comfort. One man blind blunders on his way, longing for the light of day, and God in Christ will open the blind eyes. Incarnation is the revelation of the God in Whose hand our breath is and Whose are all our ways.

By that incarnation He has revealed to us the purposes of His nearness. He is near to save - a great word, the most gracious word of all - to save men, to remake them in their spiritual life, and by that means to renew them in their moral life and ultimately to perfect their entire being. He is near man to save, and in order to do it He is near men to govern them.

The discovery of the nearness of God, come when it may or how it may, creates responsibility. It is possible that even now, in this evening hour, God has broken through in some life, and the sense of His nearness has come to the soul. If it has been so, follow the gleam, adjust thy life toward that light, take up the poise of soul that answers the call out of eternity, consent no longer to think of thyself as of the dust and as of today alone. Follow the gleam. To obey is to follow on to know more perfectly. To follow on to know more perfectly is to come to enlargement of life, and is to come ultimately to the perfecting of life. "Surely God is in this place," and let us say, We know it. If so, if ye know this thing, happy are ye if ye do all that the great truth suggests!